THE ROMANISATION OF SIAMESE WORDS

BY

HIS MAJESTY THE KING.

The Romanisation of Siamese Words.

I have read, with much interest, the discussion by the Siam Society of this vexed question, and I agree that some sort of system should be adopted so as to ensure at least a measure of uniformity in the transliteration of Siamese words. Unfortunately I have not had the opportunity of reading M. Petithuguenin's paper in full, so that I can offer no criticism one way or another. The question of romanisation has however interested me for some time, and I have also felt the need of some uniform method of transliteration. I have been trying a certain system, which has been used for some little time past in Court Circulars; but I have nevertheless felt that it is still imperfect, and even in Court Circulars, the transliteration of proper names has not been quite uniform. The reasons for this are as follows:

1). Wherever words of Sanskrit or Pali origin appear, the system as adopted by Orientalists for the transliteration of Devânâgari characters has been followed, but

2). In transliterating purely Siamese words, the system does not work so well, and gives rise to not a few misconceptions which tend to confuse. Thus, for example, take the word "ทัน," which, by the aforesaid system, would be transliterated as "*dan*"; but there is also a Siamese word with the same sound, viz. "ฑัน," which has a totally different meaning. How is the word to be transliterated so as to differentiate it from "ทัน"? If we are to argue that the letter "ฑ" is merely a corruption of the letter "ฑ," and that therefore the letter "t" should represent it, then we should have to romanise the word "ฑัน" as "*tan*." But then what above the Siamese word "ฑัน,"

which again has a totally different meaning, but whose sound is really exactly what might be properly represented by "*tan*"? This will be enough to show the impracticability of entirely adopting the Orientalist system of transliteration for purely Siamese words. It is evident that some sort of modification is required.

3). Another cause of the irregularity in the transliterating of proper names, which have appeared from time to time in Court Circulars, is as follows: There are certain proper names which, though wrongly romanised, have become so well-known that one hesitates to change them before some sort of definite system for transliteration has been adopted. For example take the name of "พระยาพิพัฒ." By the Orientalist system, it should be "Bibadh"; but the gentleman himself spells his name "Phipat," presumably following the rule of phonetic spelling, and he has been "Phya Phipat" so long, that were he to be mentioned as "Phya Bibadh," very likely the general public may even think this to be another gentleman altogether. This is the reason for the irregularity which has characterised the romanisation of proper names in Court Circulars.

Personally, I think it absolutely futile to attempt to transliterate phonetically, most attempts towards adopting any such system being usually attended by results both ludicrous and confusing. The chief objection in my opinion, is that each person spells according to his own individual sense of hearing. Thus, the late Director of the Royal Survey Department used to write "Muang *Chawn*" when we meant to romanise "เมือง ฮด"! It does not in any way represent the Siamese pronunciation of the name. A local newspaper has it that it does not understand why a word written "Yugala" should be pronounced "*Yukhon.*" But then, nor do I understand why a word written "though" should be pronounced "*tho*"; worse still, why should "who" be pronounced "*hoo*," while "when" is pronounced "*wen*," not "*hen*"?

These, however, are not quite fair examples, for "Yugala" is so written because of its derivation from the Sanskrit, so that we must compare it with an English word derived from some classical or other language. For example, the word "physic" is pronounced as though it were written "fissik," not "fie-sik" as should be the case were the "y" to retain its ordinary vowel sound. Again to write "medisin," "doktor," "manoover," and "leftenant" would be phonetically correct, though the words would look very strange. Proper names phonetically written would look stranger still, as for example "*Jorge Jaksun*," "*Walter Wotsun*," &c. French is not much better. For example the verb "aimer"; "aime," "aimes," "aiment," are all differently written, though phonetically they are pronounced practically the same. Why then should we do not write "*J'aime*," "*tu aime*," and "*ils aime*"? Again why write "*trop tard*" when you pronounce it "*tro tar*"? Also a stranger having been told that the French for boat is "bateau," what is there to prevent him from writing "*caneau*" instead of "canot" when mentioning another kind of boat? The explanation is too obvious to need being repeated; and for a similar reason, it should also be quite obvious why words derived from Sanskrit or Pali should be written apparently without any regard to their phonetic pronunciation. If we are to preserve the etymology of words, we must spell them as nearly as possible like what they used to be in the original. All writing, after all, is mere conventional signs, to transcribe spoken words. The value of each sign is what one chooses to give to it. Thus, were I to invent a new form of writing, there is no reason why I should not put down a sign "(x)" thus and give it a sound value the same as ก or "k," and so long as I always used (x) to represent the same sound, that seems to be all that really matters; confusion would only arise when I use that sign as I please, and make it stand for more sounds than one. Thus, in my opinion, it is a mere matter of convention as to how such and such a Siamese word should be romanised, for no matter how much one tries, there is absolutely no use hoping to romanise Siamese words so as to be phonetically correct.

I therefore suggest that a conventional system be adopted for romanisation, and the following are my own suggestions:—

1). All words derived from Pali or Sanskrit should be romanised according to the Orientalist rule, as far as possible, with a

few modifications, as for example บุรี might still be transliterated "*buri*," though "*puri*" would obviously be more correct; but, though manifestly a corruption, it is not really too corrupt to be confusing.

2) In romanising purely Siamese words, the same rule might be followed in case of certain letters, but the rule might be modified by the introduction of certain Roman characters to represent Siamese characters and also by a little shifting about of consonants in order to make them more closely represent the Siamese sound. For example, the letter "J" represents "ช" in words of classical origin such as "วิชิต," which would be written "Vijit," but supposing we wanted to write the purely Siamese word "ชิด" (meaning "close"), to write "*jid*" would be absurd. We therefore require another letter to represent the "ช" for Siamese words and I propose that Pallegoix's system should be adopted, *i.e.*, use "X" to represent the letter "ช" in purely Siamese words. I also propose that the letter "Q," which is not employed at all in the romanisation of Pali or Sanskrit, might be employed to represent the letter "ค" in purely Siamese words, "G" being used only in words of classical origin. This may alter the appearance of a few well-known words: *e.g.*, "Chang" (elephant) would become "*Xang*," "Klong" (canal) would become "*Qlong*," and so on, but they would not be so altered as to be absolutely unrecognisable, and one would in time get used to their new form.

3) I propose that the tone value of Siamese consonants might be ignored altogether, "high" and "low" consonants of the same class being represented by the same Roman characters, so that distinctive marks might not have to be employed on consonants. Thus, "ทัด" and "ถัด" would both be romanised as "*Thad*"; "ผัน" and "พัน" would both be "*Phan*;" and "สน" and "ซน" would both be "*Son*." This may seem confusing, but in practice I do not anticipate much trouble, since the context would always serve to make clear

the meaning. For instance, in English "all" and "awl" are pronounced just the same, but no one ever makes a mistake and thinks that the shoemaker uses his "*all*" to bore holes with! Similarly, in French one would hardly make the mistake of writing about people embarking in "canaux" when "canots" is what is meant.

For similar reasons as given above, I think it would be best also to ignore all Siamese tone accents : ่ ้ ๊ ๋

4) I would however insist on words being transliterated as closely as possible to the original ; I mean to say, that any attempts at such fanciful transliteration as "*Chawn*" for "ชล" should not be encouraged. It might of course be objected that to romanise "ชล" as "Jol" is not correct, since it really sounds more like "*Chon*"; but then why write "who" when you read it "*hoo*," and why write "why" when "*y*" would do just as well? Why write "canot" when you only call it "cano"? And you would hardly recognise "*Ilfêbo*" unless you read it out aloud, which would at once prove that to write "*Il fait beau*" is really sheer waste of time, and is not more phonetically correct than the strange looking "Ilfébo."

After all, if I understand rightly, what is required is a system for romanising such Siamese words and proper names as have to be used in conjunction with English or some other European language, and not to wholly write the Siamese language in Roman characters. If the latter were the intention, then I should strongly object to having anything to do with the proposal at all; but if the former is the case, then I really believe that I might submit that my proposed system of romanisation may not be found inadequate.

Taking the consonants first, the following is my proposed table of transliteration :

Siamese letters.	Roman.	
	For Sanskrit & Pali derivatives.	For purely Siamese.
ก	K	K
ข (ฃ)	Kh	Kh
ค (ฅ)	G	Q
ฆ	Gh	Gh
ง	N (or Ng)	Ng
จ	Ch	Ch
ฉ	Chh	Chh
ช	J	X
ซ	—	S
ฌ	Jh	—
ญ	Ñ	Ñ (or Ny)
ฎ	—	D
ฏ	T	T
ฐ	Th	Th
ฑ	D	D
ฒ	Dh	Dh
ณ	N	N
ด	—	D
ต	T	T
ถ	Th	Th
ท	D	Th
ธ	Dh	Th
น	N	N
บ	—	B

Siamese letters.	Roman.	
	For Sanskrit & Pali derivatives.	For Purely Siamese.
ป	P	P
ผ	Ph	Ph
ฝ	—	F
พ	B	Ph
ฟ	—	F
ภ	Bh	Bh
ม	M	M
ย	Y	Y
ร	R	R
ล	L	L
ว	V or W	V or W
ศ	Ś	—
ษ	Sh	—
ส	S	S
ห	H	H
ฬ	L	—
ฮ	—	H
ฤ ฤๅ	Ri, Rî	Ri, Rî
ฦ ฦๅ	Li, Lî	Li, Lî

N. B. As a rule, when "ท" is followed by a "ร," the combination is pronounced as though it were "ซ," *e. g.*, "ทรง," for what reason it seems hard to explain ; but since such is the rule, we may as well romanise all such words by using an "S." (Personally, I believe it arose out of the fact, that our religious teachers at one period in our history came over from Burma ; and the Burmese pronounce the "ท" as "th" in "thin,"

which the Siamese doubtless found too hard to manage, not being given to lisping, so that the " s " sound was substituted for it).

So far so good. Next come the vowels, which are even more difficult to romanise than the consonants. The simple vowels present no difficulty at all ; for giving each Roman vowel its value in Italian, and adding the circumflex for long sounds, we arrive at the following table :—

ะ = a

า = â

ิ = i

ี = î

ุ = u

ู = û

เ = e

โ = ô

Some dipthongs are also comparatively easy, thus :—

ึ = ú

ื = ûe

แ = ae

ไ = aí

อาย = ai or ây

เอา = au or ao

อาว = âo

อิว = iu

อุย = uy

เอว = eo

แอว = aeo

เออ	=	oe
เอย	=	oey
ออย	=	oy
โอย	=	ôy
อัว	=	ua
อวย	=	uay
เอียะ	=	ia
เอีย	=	îa
เอือ	=	üa
เอือย	=	üay
เอียว	=	iau

It remains to mention that the short "o" sound would be naturally represented by "o" without the circumflex, so that we get "*On*" for "อน," "*Ong*" for "อง," "*Ok*" for "อก," and so on.

Now comes the greatest of all stumbling blocks in the way of romanisation, namely how to represent the sound "ออ." Mr. Giblin used "*aw*", but there are a great many drawbacks to its adoption; for example, it seems almost impossible to recognise "*Menam Nawi*" until one looks at the map, when it would dawn upon one that the name is meant for "แม่ น้ำ น้อย" and not for a newly discovered stream of the name of "นาวี"! On the other hand, if we employ an "o" to represent the sound "ออ," there is great danger of confusion, since the same letter has to represent also the short and long "o" sound; thus, when we come across a word written "*hon*," it would be extremely hard to know whether to read "หน," or "โหน," or "หอน." The sound "เอาะ" is another which I find hard to represent with Roman vowels. I have observed, that when the sound occurs in such words as "เกาะ," it is represented by "oh." Are

we to take it that "h" placed after a vowel has the effect of shortening it? It does not have that effect in English, surely. I confess I find myself unable to offer any satisfactory suggestion as to how the sounds "ออ" and "เอาะ" should be represented, and since both are sounds frequently employed in Siamese, I think that something ought to be decided about their transliteration.

The whole question of Romanisation really concerns the European more than my people; but at the same time, I should be glad to see some sort of uniform system adopted, rather than to have to endure the haphazard and fanciful systems, which not only each body of men but also each individual, seems to use for romanising my language. Since the question concerns Europeans more than it does us, I consider that the proper body to discuss the question is the Siam Society, and I beg to submit this paper as an expression of my own personal opinion, in my capacity of Patron of the Siam Society, of which position I may say I am extremely proud.

VAJIRAVUDH R.

NOTE.

His Majesty having been graciously pleased to send to our Society for publication a series of suggestions regarding the Romanisation of Siamese words, with the express desire that these suggestions should be taken into consideration, it was decided at a meeting of the Council held on January 7th, in the first place to print His Majesty's paper and to distribute it to subscribers. At the same time a Committee, consisting of Mr. Crosby, Mr. Petithuguenin and the undersigned, was appointed to report about the various schemes now before the Society, (viz., in addition to His Majesty's paper, Dr. Frankfurter's paper in Vol. III, part 2, and Mr. Petithuguenin's paper in Vol. IX, part 3), and the feasibility of adopting a system of romanisation for the publications of the Siam Society. The Council, in pursuing this course, believe that they are best fulfilling the wishes of His Majesty, for whose consideration of their efforts they beg to express their humble thanks.

For the Council of the Siam Society,

O. FRANKFURTER, Ph. D.

as President.

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